

A FORM CRITICAL APPROACH TO THE ORAL TRADITIONS OF THE BLACK
CHURCH AS THEY RELATE TO THE CELEBRATION OF DEATH

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ABSTRACT

This project will study the extent to which the methodology of form criticism can be applied to the oral traditions of the Black church. The particular aspect of oral tradition to be examined in this project will be that related to the celebration of death as viewed from the context of Black culture.

It is felt that the celebration of death by the Black church reflects a distinctive acculturation similar to the distinctiveness of Black speech, Black music, and Black worship; nevertheless we are concerned with the antecedents of cultural experiences and their origins.

Form criticism has served as a most useful tool in Old and New Testament scholarship. Analysis of structure, genre, setting, and intention have provided a most illuminating awareness of the meaning of particular texts, and the history related to these texts.

In the use of form criticism wailing and lament have been found to have commonality. Yet within that commonality there are significant differences in the performances by various cultures. Herein we shall use the genre of the dirge to note the similarities and differences. First, we shall examine the Old Testament period; second, an African tribe's dirges will be reviewed; third, the "dirge" of the Black church will be scrutinized.

Following the introduction, which defines the terms, scopes, and goals of the project, will be a form critical study of a prophetic dirge by Jeremiah. Close attention will be given to the metrical forms of the qinah and mas-hal. The third chapter will analyse the funeral dirges of a West African tribe; namely, the Akan tribe of Ghana. We shall examine the typology related to these dirges.

Chapter Four will, then focus on the Black celebration of death and present a dirge model congruent to the Black church. Particular emphasis will be placed upon the dual streams of tradition, i.e., the Old Testament and African precedents which helped shape the practices of the Black church in terms of the celebration of death.

The concluding chapter will indicate the feasibility of the use the form critical method, and will state a re-emphasis of the term "celebration" from the Black perspective.

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

The title of the project is A Form Critical Approach to the Oral Traditions of the Black Church as They Relate to the Celebration of Death. As the title indicates it will attempt to discern the distinctiveness or uniqueness of the practices of the Black church as they are related to the celebration of death, and to the oral tradition from which these derived.

Some previous generations tended to reject their African past and earnestly sought to emulate and embrace European culture and behavior. However, during the past two decades, Black culture has been attempting to identify its roots and to enunciate the factors which it feels has produced a distinctive philosophy of thought. Black and white historians have been quite prolific in the number of books published in which they have attempted to demonstrate the importance of finding the true and proper facets of past conditioning which are reflected in the ways Blacks interact and behave.¹ Black theologians, in similar manner, have

¹These would include John H. Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom [New York: Knopf, 1967]; Lerone Bennett, Before the Mayflower [Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1973]; George P. Rawick, The American Slave [Westport: Greenwood, 1972] and Eugene D. Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll [New York: Vintage Books, 1976].

spoken pointedly about this situation.² Both, historians and theologians, have utilized the previous writings of earlier historians and theologians.³

A common theme throughout all of these works has been the recognition of the importance of the oral tradition which preceded the customs and practices which are now used by Black culture and the Black church. Black people have come to realize the intrinsic value of who and what they are, and why they do certain things in their own way. In terms of the Black church, this has resulted in many research projects about the music and preaching found therein.⁴

²The most important of these are James A. Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation (Philadelphia: Lippencott, 1970); J. Deotis Roberts, Liberation and Reconciliation (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971); and Joseph R. Washington, Black Religion (Boston: Beacon Press, 1954).

³The classics in this are are W.E.B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk (New York: Fawcett, 1961); Carter G. Woodson, The History of the Negro Church (Washington: Associated Publishers, 1972); Benjamin E. Mays and J.W. Nicholson, The Negro's Church (New York: Institute of Social Research, 1933); and E. Franklin Frazier, The Negro Church in America, New York: Schocken Books, 1974].

⁴Outstanding works in the field of music would include Miles Mark Fisher, Negro Slave Songs in the United States, (New York, Citadel Press, 1953); Eileen Southern, The Music of Black Americans (New York: Norton, 1971); James H. Cone, The Spirituals and the Blues (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), and Wyatt T. Walker, Somebody's Calling My Name (Valley Forge, Judson Press, 1979). Among the books on preaching are William H. Pipes, Say Amen, Brother (Westport: Negro Universities Press, 1970) and Henry H. Mitchell, (Philadelphia: Lippencott, 1970).

However, when we recall DuBois' description of the Black church as "the preacher, the music, and the frenzy"⁵ we are quickly made aware that little has been done by way of analysis or documentary research on the third category of the "frenzy" which we now refer to in the project as celebration.

The Black church from early on i.e., "the invisible institution"⁶ was best characterized for its celebration in music and preaching. At the same time, however, we have overlooked a significant aspect of Black culture which demonstrated its early strength; namely its celebration of death. As we pay closer attention to the Black family, the Black church, and the Black community we have come to realize a deepening awareness of the strength inherent in these component parts. Thus, it should be of great importance to the leadership of the church to seek a greater understanding of how and why we came to have this kind of celebration. In other words, we need to try to discover the base from which we derived our present conditioning.

Since the Black church relates itself to a dual stream of tradition, namely, its African roots and the Biblical traditions, especially through the influence of the Old Testament, we shall view the celebration of death as

⁵DuBois, p. 190

⁶Frazier, p. 23

depicted through events in the Old Testament and in African customs. We shall be interested to find what methodology has been used to trace the origins of both traditions. We shall be especially interested in determining the African linkage as it relates to oral traditions behind past and present patterns of celebration.

The form critical approach has proven to be a most useful tool in understanding the Bible, Old and New, as it related to its oral traditions. In this context, then, the thesis for the project is the form critical method can, also be used to investigate the celebration of death in relationship to the oral traditions of the Black church.

The major terms and concepts to be discussed will be inclusive of those stated in the title itself. These are form criticism, oral tradition, the Black church, and celebration. Then there are the basic components of form criticism which are structure, genre, setting, and intention. Finally, we must define and try to understand the roles of lament and dirge and some of the nuances contained therein.

Form criticism seeks to determine the folk material in existence at the time of the oral tradition period. Hence it was interested in finding the basic unit, the setting in life out of which the material arose, the category or classification of the material used, and the purpose for which the material was used.

Oral tradition would, then, be defined as the verbal record of the events and occurrences of the early period of a group. The early computer of stored data was in the memory bank of the people themselves and was released as individuals released these events. Families, thus, passed on their heritage through the spoken word. Clans and tribes conceptualized a way of behavior and its transmission into a definite pattern. The transmission of these accounts continued orally until they were transferred to a written record. We must remember, also, that at the time of written records only a few could write and the majority still had to depend upon oral transmission.

One can easily perceive the problems to be encountered in trying to peel back the outer layers to arrive at the beginning events. Hence we can deeply appreciate the usefulness of the form critical method as a tool for such inquiry.

The Black church must be defined out of an historical context which must include its theological point of view. The Black church exists because "American Christianity never fully came to grips with the issue of race in this country."⁷ It came into being because a need had to be met. One can recall similar circumstances in the period of

⁷Latta R. Thomas, Biblical Faith and the Black American (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1976), p. 131.

the early church in the first century when it had to go underground. The Black church existed as the "invisible institution to serve a need. It exists as a "visible" institution because it is an agency which permits the members of its community to express its own feelings and thoughts in its own way whether functionally or theologically. To this end the Black church must be defined as the repository of religious behavior which reflects both an internal and external set of values.

The other major term which must be defined is that which serves as the crux of this project, celebration. Webster's New World Dictionary defines celebration as an expression "to perform [a ritual ceremony etc.] publicly and formally," or "to honor or praise publicly."⁸

We celebrate remembered events both in the secular and sacred realm. Thus we celebrate events such as birth dates, victories and/or defeats in athletic and political arenas. We give special attention to anniversaries of significant occasions. These will include weddings, length of service of employment, and the establishment of an organization. We celebrate the significant events of religion. The number of celebrations depends upon the unit with which we identify ourselves.

⁸ Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, 2nd College ed. [New York: Collins World, 1978], p. 228.

Paradoxically, we celebrate life itself and we place in high esteem and render special honor to those who have made significant contributions to their fellow beings. Some treasure such responses that they indicate "they want their flowers while they are living." We tend, however to verbalize such thought and responses at the time of death.

Such responses have been celebrated in laments and dirges as seen in Hebrew and African society. This project will attempt to illustrate how the Black church and community has verbalized its celebrations. Dirges and laments have been shown in Hebrew and African backgrounds to exhibit commendation and ridicule. We shall examine Black celebration to see if such elements are found within it.

When we make inquiry into materials which are written specifically about celebration from the perspective of Black oral tradition we find limited resources. In fact, Charles Long takes Black theologians to task regarding their scope of inquiry and methodology:

Most of the studies of religion have employed the methodology of the social sciences; hardly any of the studies have come to terms with the specifically religious elements in the religion of Black Americans.

Henry Mitchell's Black Belief with the sub-title of Folk

⁹Charles H. Long, "Perspectives for a Study of Afro-American Religion in the United States," History of Religions, XI [August 1971], 54.

Beliefs of Blacks in America and West Africa¹⁰ should be considered as an early attempt to meet Long's criteria of a systematic study of Black religion.

Alongside this study have been several inquiries noted in various periodicals, including those by Faulkner,¹¹ Roberts¹² and Bennett.¹³ More recent articles relating to folk belief and oral tradition would include Cone,¹⁴ Cooper¹⁵ and Rivers.¹⁶ To these must be added River's book¹⁷ on celebration, and Walker's book¹⁸ which addresses itself to oral tradition.

¹⁰ Henry H. Mitchell, Black Belief (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

¹¹ William J. Faulkner, "The Influence of Folklore Upon the Religious Experience of the Ante-Bellum Negro," Journal of Religious Thought, XXIV, 2 [1967-68], 26-28.

¹² J. Deotis Roberts, "Folklore and Religion: The Black Experience," Journal of Religious Thought, XXVII, 2 [1970], 5-15.

¹³ Robert A. Bennett, "Black Experience and the Bible," Theology Today, XXVII [January 1971], 422-32.

¹⁴ James H. Cone, "Black Spirituals: A Theological Interpretation," Theology Today, XXIX [April 1972], 54-66.

¹⁵ B. Lee Cooper, "The Image of the Black Man: Contemporary Lyrics as Oral History," Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center, V [Spring 1978], 105-22.

¹⁶ Clarence J. Rivers, "The Oral Tradition versus the Oracular Western Tradition," in Robert V. Hovda [ed.] Thus Far By Faith [Washington: National Office for Black Catholics, 1977], pp. 38-49.

¹⁷ _____, Celebration (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963).

¹⁸ Walker, Somebody's Calling My Name.

The Old Testament studies have shown the form critical method to be very useful in providing answers to questions concerning worship in relation to the cult.¹⁹ Of greater importance in terms of the scope of this project the form critical method has provided greater theological insight into the use of the lament.²⁰ A similar study of the dirge as used by the Akan tribe in Ghana in West Africa should reveal similar theological insights.²¹

The setting in life, as related to the celebration of death by the Black church and community, should provide a continuum to be revealed through a form critical inquiry. Death has been an ever-present reality for Black culture. They have lived with it as an historic actuality through the events of the "middle passage;" whippings and degradations of slavery days, lynchings and killings of reconstruction days; race riots of post-war periods; and the terrible self destruction arising out of urbanization and ghetto life of the present day.

Our pursuit of this quest of inquiry will be un-

¹⁹H.H. Rowley, Worship in Ancient Israel [London: SPCK, 1978].

²⁰Gerhard von Rad, Old Testament Theology 2 vols. [New York: Harper and Brothers, 1965].

²¹J.H. Nketia, Funeral Dirges of the Akan Peoples [Achimota: Townsend, 1965].

folded in the chapters which follow. In Chapter II we shall use form critical models of the Old Testament as examples of the manner that death was celebrated through dirges and laments. In Chapter III we shall, again, use the form critical method to describe the dirges of the Akan tribe.

In Chapter IV, through the use of a folk sermon as a poem dirge, selections of musical passages, and an incident in drama, we shall see if we can apply the form critical method to the celebration of death in terms of the oral traditions of the Black church and community. Chapter V, the final chapter, will consist of a summary and our conclusions.

Chapter II

A PROPHETIC DIRGE

Interspersed between the two prose passages of Jeremiah 9:12-16 and 9:23-25 we find a poetic passage which in Old Testament terminology should be properly called a qinah.

This passage reads as follows:

Hear, O women, the word of the Lord,
and let your ear receive the word of his mouth;
teach your daughters a lament,
and each to his neighbor a dirge,
For death has come into our windows,
it has entered our palaces,
cutting off the children from the streets
and the young men from the squares.
Speak, "Thus says the Lord:
"The dead bodies of men shall fall
like dung upon the open field,
like sheaves after the reaper,¹
and none shall gather them."¹ Jer. 9:17-22

The literary style of the qinah can be recognized by the fact that:

the qinah meter was styled in the manner that the first half of the verse had three accents, the second half had two accents. This is referred to as the lamentation meter.²

Jeremiah, and other prophets, utilized the dirge which had been formally structured by the time of the prophet to indicate the death of the community as well as the individual.

¹Unless noted otherwise all the biblical references are from the Revised Standard Version.

²Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Bible (New York: McGraw Hill, 1963), p. 1571.

The prophet, thus, adopted the norm of the qinah as an outlet for their message of judgment. We shall, also, speak of the mashal, a mocking dirge, as it was utilized by the prophets. In our examination of the passage we shall be looking for the influence that oral tradition may have contributed to the occasion of the rendering of the dirge by Jeremiah. In this regard, it is interesting to note that Jeremiah in judgment of Judah, and Amos in judgment of Israel, used the same form to proclaim their messages.

This pericope of Jeremiah 9:17-21 will serve as the paradigm of an Old Testament celebration of death. In utilizing the methodology of form criticism we will follow the procedures outlined by Gene M. Tucker.³ Thus we will be examining the passage as it relates to structure, genre, setting, and intention. The sub-divisions for this and the succeeding chapters will be patterned according to these constructs.

³Gene M. Tucker, Form Criticism of the Old Testament [Philadelphia: Fortress Press], pp. 12-17.

STRUCTURE

The structure of the unit may be outlined as follows:

- I. Introduction: the prophetic formula. [17-20]
 - A. Invitation to the professional singers. [17]
 - B. Purpose of the lament. [18]
 - 1. Motivation. [19a]
 - 2. The imminent exile. [19b]
 - C. The expanded commission. [20a]
 - 1. The new assignment. [20b]
- II. A. A new introductory formula
 - A. The vision of personified death. [21]
 - B. No harvesters. [22]

The unit presents, first, Yahweh as the spokesman to Jeremiah, followed by Jeremiah serving as Yahweh's spokesman to the people. [17-18] Yahweh calls for the professional mourners to perform their duties, for he is about to pronounce the nations' doom and their ejection from the land as a result of his judgment. [19] They would then be given a new assignment:

conjuring up a situation characteristic of a time of woe: the women shall no longer teach their daughters merry songs: but from their childhood they shall be educated to become professional mourners.⁴

⁴Aage Bentzen, Introduction to the Old Testament [Copenhagen: Gad, 1948], I, 137.

The actual contents of the dirge are stated in the concluding verses. Jeremiah, first, would have the professional singers proclaim that which would have been a familiar refrain to the mourners:

For death has come into our windows,
it has entered our palaces,
cutting off the children from the streets
and the young men from the squares. [21]

As we shall understand in a later section, the above passage related to a much earlier situation. Then, Yahweh's voice would be the concluding one as the mourners would sing:

The dead bodies of men shall fall
like dung upon the open field
and none shall gather them. [22]

Bentzen paraphrases the latter passage to read as follows:

The fallen are lying like rows in the fields as heaps of corn behind the harvestmen, but useless, for there is no one who follows who will gather in.

We shall return to Bentzen's statement in the final section of this chapter.

In the conclusion to this section we note that the passage reveals itself to contain both qinah and mashal. The message is proclaimed by first and third person action. The professional mourners serve as the conduit of both Yahweh and Jeremiah.

⁵Ibid.

GENRE

First, we have identified this passage as a qinah. It is classified as a mourning song, a lament for the dead. The qinah is recognized, either by metrical form, as indicated in the introductory remarks; or, by specific terminology related to the dirge. Both were easily identifiable to non-mourners as well as mourners. The metrical form which carried a three/two accentuation was generally accompanied by a musical instrument.

A most familiar passage which relates to the metrical form is that which is found in Amos 5:1-2:

Fallen/ no-more/ to-rise,/
 is-the-virgin/ Israel;/
 forsaken/ on-her/ land,/
 with-none/ to-raise-her-up./

E.W. Nicholson accents the Jeremiah passage in the following manner:

Death/ has-climbed-in/ through-our-windows
 it-has-entered/ our-palaces,/
 it-sweeps-off/ the-children/ in-the-open-air/
 and-drives-young-men/ from-the-streets./ N.E.B.

"the second unit...breaking short and creating the effect of a catch in the throat."⁶

⁶E.W. Nicholson, Jeremiah 1-25 [Cambridge: University Press, 1973], p. 96.

The other recognizable form of the traditional qinah relates to some specific terms. Among these are "Ah how" and "alas."

Therefore says the Lord concerning Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah, king of Judah:

They shall not lament for him, saying
'Ah my brother!' or 'Ah sister.'

They shall not lament for him saying,
'Ah lord' or 'Ah his majesty.' Jer. 22:18

The word "alas" is, also, recognized as an expression of lament:

They cried 'alas, alas.' Amos 5:16

'Alas my brother or alas my sister...' I Kings 13:30

or if it were a member of a royal family:

'Alas Lord! Alas majesty.' Jer. 34:5

Georg Fohrer classifies the Old Testament dirge into three categories. He states:

The form that remained closest to its original significance is the personal dirge following the death of a particular person.

The second category is the collective dirge. This genre reflects the lament over "tribes, cities, or nations whose downfall it echoes."⁸

Fohrer's third category does not speak of "real death and destruction, but rather death and destruction to come."⁹ This is the prophetic dirge which is proleptic in

⁷ Georg Fohrer, Introduction to the Old Testament [Nasville: Abingdon Press, 1968], p. 276.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

style. Fohrer adds that "the threat of disaster is so sure to take place that its results can already be mourned."¹⁰

We shall emphasize this point when we speak about Jeremiah's intent regarding the proclamation of the pericope. For says Jeremiah:

Do not enter the house of mourning, or go to lament or bemoan them: for I have taken away my peace from this people...my steadfast love and mercy. Jer. 16:5-6

Up to this point we have only been concerned with the ginah but we must not overlook the other form which was a most effective tool for the prophets; namely, the mashal - the mocking song. Otto Eissfeldt describes it in these words:

Mocking song and the funeral dirge are closely related or rather have come together in the course of development.¹¹

The close kinship with the ginah is made manifest in the manner in which the prophets used it, and the announced death by taunt was not to solicit sorrow but exaltation.

In passages which should be classified as oracles against foreign nations Jeremiah combines elements of the dirge and the taunt:

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Otto Eissfeldt, The Old Testament (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p.92.

Egypt, Judah, Edom, the sons of Ammon, Moab, and all who dwell in the desert that cut the corners of their hair.
Jer. 9:26

Included in the "cup of wrath" passage are these words:

But I took the cup from the Lord's hand and made all the nations to whom the Lord sent me to drink it...all the kings of the foreign folk among them...all who cut the corners of their hair. Jer. 25:17, 20a, 23a

The cutting of the hair was one of the physical manifestations of mourning. Eissfeldt adds these words:

Strike up a mocking song or a funeral dirge whether (or not) ¹²the latter seriously and reveals a mocking undertone.

Eissfeldt's point must be remembered when we discuss the taunt element of Black spirituals and Black drama as they relate to oral tradition. The spiritual says that in terms of expectations:

"Everybody talking about heaven
Aint going there."

In concluding this section, we must note the prophetic nature of the dirge and taunt as a genre utilized by Jeremiah and other prophets. Especially do we note that Jeremiah used both genre in his proclamation of judgment.

¹²Ibid.

SETTING

Klaus Koch, quoting Gunkel, informs us that to determine the setting of a text four questions should be asked:

Who is speaking?
 who is listening?
 what is the prevailing mood?
 what effect is sought?

Since our overall setting is the house of mourning, the above questions must be answered as follows:

1. God, the surrogate of the mourner, is speaking through Jeremiah.
2. The community of mourners is listening.
3. Sorrow, loss, and anguish is the prevailing mood both on the part of God and the people.
4. Realization of the impending doom is the desired result.

Undoubtedly, Israel derived many of the practices of the dirge and lament from their neighbors of the immediate and Near East countries:

The sarcophagus of King Ahiroum of Biblos [ca 1200 B.C.] depicts them striking their breasts and tearing their hair.¹⁴

Fohrer, further, indicates:

The lament for the dead originally constituted a part of the cult of the dead, from whom the professional status of the mourning women derived.¹⁵

¹³Klaus Koch, The Growth of Biblical Tradition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), p.33.

¹⁴Roland DeVaux, Ancient Israel (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), I, 59.

¹⁵Fohrer, p. 275.

It is very likely that "the lament for the vegetation god" was among the first encountered and witnessed by the Israelites upon their entrance into and occupation of the land. The expressions and practices which accompanied these laments and dirges were evidently copied by Israel. These included the wearing of sackcloth, the rending of the garment, the gashing and mutilation of the body, and the shaving of the hair.

On the other hand, we are made aware that Israel, itself did not practice the cult of the dead. Furthermore, we would be cognizant of the fact that though Israel borrowed dirges and practices of lament, these dirges remained secularized expressions through the channels of "human emotions, love and hate, honor and mockery." They remained within the vernacular of human attributes, and were expressed accordingly.

We learn that the prophets contemporized certain practices which related to lament and dirge in order to give further meaning to their message. For example:

the putting of one's hand on one's head was a regular sign of¹⁸ mourning, and that it signified sorrow and shame.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid., p.276.

¹⁸Vaux, p. 59.

This sorrow and shame is expressed by Jeremiah when he told the people that they would be put to shame by Egypt and Assyria:

From it you will come away
with your hands upon your head. Jer. 2:27a

Thus are we reminded that settings assumed a variable posture and as Koch expresses it:

The transition of a type to a second setting in life is very frequent indeed. It is most easily seen when ¹⁹a type which was of oral origin is inserted into a work.

In this regard, Umberto Cassuto ²⁰ and Shalom Paul ²¹ help shed light on v. 20 of our pericope. With the background material which they provide, we are able to see that Jeremiah has developed the hermeneutic of the prophetic dirge which he proclaimed out of the context of the impending disaster for Judah. According to Cassuto the dirge may be related to an ancient conflict between Baal and Mot:

...as a precaution against Mot [Death] Baal orders his craftsmen not to open any windows in his palace lest Mot should enter by one of them and kill his wives. Evidently the belief was rife that Mot, or Death, was wont to enter the houses through the windows. This enables us to understand more precisely the passage in 9:20 For Death ²²has come into our windows. It has entered our palaces.

¹⁹Koch, p.36.

²⁰Umberto Cassuto, "The Palace of Baal," Journal of Biblical Literature, LXI [1942], 51-56.

²¹Shalom M. Paul, "Cuneiform Light on Jeremiah 9:20," Biblica, XLIX [1968], 373-76.

²²Cassuto, p. 54.

Paul, however, in his study of the Ugaritic text amends Cassuto's thesis to indicate that instead of Mot it was a Mesopotamian demon who:

enter[s] through the windows, slithers through the cap of the door pivot. 'The young man she kills, the female slaves she destroys, the children she smashes.'²³

Paul adds these actions would remind one of Jeremiah's message: "cutting off the babes from the streets, the young men from the street."²⁴

Both projections validate Koch's thesis that there can be a transition to a second setting. In this regard, it is an important point to remember in determining the setting for this pericope and any other situation which relates to a past tradition.

So we, again, refer to Jeremiah's hermeneutic of the prophetic dirge that he is indebted to setting of the lament and dirge. The call for the mourning women is conditioned to the use of women in earlier cult activity. The activity of death would be similar to the activity of death in the earlier context.

²³ Paul, p. 375

²⁴ Ibid.

INTENTION

Why did Jeremiah use the genre of the qinah? What effect did he expect to achieve through its use? To answer these questions we must, first of all, recall those early occasions which mention the use of the dirge. These would include David's laments over Saul, Jonathon, and Abner. They would be regarded as laments over a particular person.

The prophets used the prophetic dirge to try to shock the nation collectively about its own demise. The mourning women were being summoned on this occasion not to lament the passing of an individual, but to lament and wail a dirge over the impending death of a people. In literary style we would judge such a technique to be that of irony. We find many examples such irony in the prophets messages.

Jeremiah is, indeed, borrowing Amos' technique at this point. As Amos had used satiric irony in his oracles against Israel's neighbors, finally ending with an oracle against Israel itself, likewise Amos used a sense of irony in his qinah - "Fallen no more to rise." Of course, the people recognized the form of a dirge at the beginning of the expression. "Who died?" they would have asked. "You died!" responded Amos. "Fallen no more to rise is Israel!" There was to be no doubt about whom the lament was being proclaimed.

"Call for the mourning women" and let them teach their daughters to lament." "Who died? the people would, again, ask." "You died!", now, would be Jeremiah's response. Hear, again, the concluding words of the qinah:

The dead bodies of men shall fall
like dung upon the open field
like sheaves after the reaper
and none shall gather them. Jer. 9:22

Present biblical scholarship sheds new light upon a key word in the passage. Let us give our attention to this point.

Bentzen, in a previous interpretation, would excise the words "like dung" as being meaningless, but he still maintains there is an intended effect in the words I have italicized below. Bentzen's interpretation would be as follows:

When this word is excised the dirge describes the fallen are lying in the fields as heaps of corn behind the harvestmen, but useless, for there follows nobody who will gather in.

Bentzen, herein, states the futility encompassed in the dirge. Nobody would be left to lament the collective death of the people.

On the other hand, William Holliday makes us aware of the allusion incorporated in the expression "like dung." He refers to the Deuteronomic Historian's comparison of an earlier prophet's relationship to a hated queen; namely

²⁵Bentzen, p. 137

Elijah, in reference to Jezebel:

...and the corpse of Jezebel shall be like dung upon the face of the field in the territory of Jezreel, so that no one can say, this Jezreel. 2 Kings 9:37

Holliday sees in this Jeremantic allusion a horrifying image. Holliday indicates the contents of the dirge which the women are to sing includes both a present and past situation:

It is not simply the distasteful comparison of the Israelite falling on the field of battle with falling dung, but more particularly it is the word that was once pronounced for Queen Jezebel...Now Jeremiah says by quoting the old phrase, the whole people is worthy of the name of the scorned queen.²⁶

We submit there is satiric irony in Jeremiah's prophetic dirge, for not only does it pronounce the ginah but it also includes the mashal against the memory of a hated foe.

²⁶William L. Holliday, Jeremiah (Philadelphia, Pilgrim Press, 1974), p. 57.

Chapter III

THE FUNERAL DIRGE OF THE AKAN PEOPLE

STRUCTURE

Thanks to J. H. Nketia's excellent research set forth in his volume on funeral dirges¹ we have a most detailed account of a manner of celebration. This account is far more explicit than that which we were able to obtain from the Old Testament. The following dirge will serve as our African pericope and around which we will make the form critical analysis.

Karikari Poti of Asumegya
When I am on the way, do not let me meet
Gye-me-di, the terror,
It is Karikari Poti, Gye-me-di, the terror
That spells death to those who meet him.

Pampam Yiadam Boakye Akum-ntem

Grandchild of Karikari Poti hails from
Asumegya Santemanso
Where the leopard roars and comes to town for its prey.

O, mother
[What of] Your children and I.
O, mother
Your children and I will feed² on the spider,
The mouse is too big a game.

The above dirge is categorized by Nketia as a TYPE "A" dirge. We shall speak of this and other types in the

¹J.H. Nketia, Funeral Dirges of the Akan People [Achimota: Townsend, 1955].

²Ibid., p. 58.

section on genre. However, now, we turn our attention to the structural analysis. Nketia indicates the dirge texts may be grouped under four main headings:

- [1] References to the Ancestor.
- [2] References to the deceased.
- [3] References to the domicile of the Ancestor and of the deceased.
- [4] Reflections and messages.³

The themes are sung by the mourners who use a repetitive pattern. These include the following:

- [a] The opening
- [b] The subject
- [c] The insertion or break
- [d] The close
- [e] The extension

Our dirge would then be structured as follows:

- [a] Karikari Poti of Asumegya
- [b] When I am on the way, do not let me meet
Gye-me-di, the terror.
It is Karikari Poti, Gye-me-di, the terror
That spells death to those who meet him.
- [c] Pampam Yiadɔm Boakye Akum-ntɛm,
- [d] Grandchild of Karikari hails from
Asumegya Santemanso
Where the leopard roars and comes to town for its
prey.
- [e] O, mother,
[What of] Your children and I.
O, Mother
Your children and I will feed⁵ on the spider,
The mouse is too big a game.

³Ibid., p. 19.

⁴Ibid., p. 52.

⁵Ibid., p. 58.

[a] Under the theme of the Ancestor the identity of Karikari Poti and his lineage would be that of Asumegya of the Aduana clan. Among the similarities of the Hebrew and African culture is the rank of the Ancestress. At the same time we are aware of a dual system of identification evolving through the female and the male. Through the female the clan lineage is delineated, and through the Ntor [paternal social group] the male descendancy is revealed.

[b] One of the main purposes of the dirge was to indicate the accomplishments of the deceased and such references would be made through a praise appellation which would allude to his skills. In this particular dirge we are informed of the skill of the deceased through a praise appellation denoting his skill as a warrior:

When I am on the way, do not let me meet
Gye-me-di, the terror.
It is Karakari Poti, Gye-me-di, the terror,⁷
That spells death to those who meet him.

[c] The next line in the dirge [the insertion or break] would include the complete identification of the deceased. Beginning with the proper name these would include the day name, i.e., the day of the week upon which the deceased was born. As indicated above the deceased would, also be identified through a praise appellation. Finally, the deceased would be given a dirge name.⁸ Nketia indicates:

⁶Ibid., p. 26.

⁷Ibid., p. 58.

⁸Ibid., p. 30.

...many dirge names are untranslatable as their exact meanings are now difficult to establish, but they have high sounding effects when introduced into dirges.

[d] Thus far we have identified the themes relating to the Ancestor and the deceased. The next section of the dirge would relate to the domicile of the Ancestor and the deceased.

Grandchild of Karakari Poti hails from
 Asumegya Santemanso
 Where¹⁰ the leopard roars and comes to town for its
 prey.

Herein we have no difficulty determining the location of the deceased. One wonders, though, if the deceased received the praise appellation in his own right, or was an appellation bestowed upon the Ancestor. For the appellation bestowed upon the Ancestor could also be bestowed upon the descendants.¹¹

[e] The theme of reflections and messages was utilized through the extension. Here the skill of the mourner could be put to work.

Thoughts of the deceased might compel the mourner to develop the theme of the deceased further, to call to him, to praise him¹², to give him a message, to reflect on her own plight.

Thus our dirge concludes with what is the mourner's own reflection:

O, mother,
 [What of] Your children and I.

⁹Ibid., p 33.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 58.

¹¹Ibid., p. 24.

¹²Ibid., p. 57.

O, mother
Your children and I will feed on the spider,
The mouse is too big a game.¹³

The mourner is, thus, given the latitude to praise the deceased, but is also able to express her own personal grief and loss. Another mourner using the same type of dirge could be citing her personal loss simultaneously with the first mourner without necessarily referring to the deceased.

As we recall the text delivered by the mourners of the Old Testament period did not allow for any deviation from the traditional pattern. The established laments did not allow for any personal expressions by the women as they mourned. Thus, the dirge for the individual or the dirge for the community did not allow for any personal feeling on the part of the women as mourners.

The structure of the Akan dirge allowed for greater flexibility on the part of the mourner. This, also, implies a sense of expectation on the part of the bereaved that such personal participation would be demonstrated by the mourner. It needs to be stated, at this point, that such expectations are manifest in the Black church. The people are encouraged to "let the spirit move."

¹³Ibid., p. 58.

GENRE

Nketia has identified four main types of dirges. In the previous section we identified a TYPE "A" dirge. A summary of its themes would include those of the Ancestor, the deceased, the place of domicile, and reflections and messages on the part of the mourner. Nketia adds:

Its main characteristic is its unity of subject for it usually refers to one Ancestor [or occasionally two brothers, two sisters], a particular attribute or accomplishment of the Ancestor, or an allusion to lineage or clan tradition; it mentions one deceased person,¹⁴ and contains as a rule, a single place of domicile.

In discussing the remaining types we shall briefly discuss their structure and include an example.

TYPE "B" is composed of a series of short stanzas and are complete units within themselves, but which could also end with a TYPE "A" message or reflection.¹⁵ The "opening" and "subject" of TYPE "A" were usually followed by a dirge-name; however, the mention of the name in TYPE "B" marked the end of the stanza.¹⁶

Grandchild of Boampan of Asokore clan
That walked in majesty amid flying bullets:
Child of a leading spokesman.

He was an elephant tusk which I was going to use
For carrying out a trumpet
Ofori, child of Konkonti.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 59.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 60.

Father Apau that overpowers bullets:
 Offspring of Nkwamfo Abrɛdwom.
 Alas Death gave me no warning
 So that I might get ready.
 Mother will go: She¹⁷ has not come back yet,
 I shall follow her.

TYPE "C" dirges appear to be those which were used as dirges for ordinary people, especially when there was nothing remarkable to say about the lineage Ancestors. Each line is a complete unit.

Grandchild of Minta that hails from Dunksease.
 Grandchild of Ɔbeɛko Asamoa that hails from Bɔnkaben.
 Grandchild of Obiyaa that hails from Abor desu
 Grandchild of Oti that drinks off the edge of the rock.
 Grandchild of Oti that drinks water trickling down from the rock.
 Grandchild of Yeboa Ɔko and offspring of a Tia man.
 Grandchild of Ɔhene Kwabena that hails from the cave in the rock.
 If he is going back to the Cave we should not prevent him for it is his place of origin¹⁸

The fourth type of dirge that Nketia includes is listed as TYPE "D." It should be regarded basically as spontaneous messages and reflections by the mourner. As related by the clanspeople this genre should incorporate by-names and praise appellations conferred upon the deceased by fellow tribemembers. The following verses sung by a daughter for her mother serves as a model for this type.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 65-6.

Grandchild of Grandsire Kwaagyei of Hwede\$mu that drinks
the water of Abono,
Daughter of a spokesman, who is herself a spokesman,
Mother, it may appear that all is well with me, but I am
struggling.

Nyaakowa of Anteade and granchild of Osafo Agyeman,
O, mother I am struggling; all is not well as it appears.
Mother, if you would send me something, I would like a
parcel and a big cooking pot that entertains strangers.

The God gpem has failed; the gourd of charms has won.
O, mother, there is no branch above which I could grasp.
Grandsire, the crab that knows the hiding place of allu-
vial gold,
What is the matter, child of the spokesman?
Mother has allowed this death to take me by surprise.
O, mother, I am struggling; all is not well as it ap-
pears.

Neither of the latter three types was chosen as the working
model for this project, but certainly one can sense the
mood projected by the mourners. The dirge thought expressed
in the above TYPE "D" model would be right at home in the
Black church. While there are variables in each of the
types there are commonalities which lend themselves com-
fortably to the genre of the funeral dirge.

The messages and reflections of Types "B" and "D;"
as reflected in the personal loss experienced by the mour-
ners, are noteworthy as vehicles of transmission from the
African roots to the Black church. Both groups could feel
"at home" in terms of the moods which are expressed.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 67-8.

Although it does not play the key role as it did in the Old Testament dirge, it is interesting to note the use of the term "alas" in the Akan dirge. Nketia cites the use of the term in one of the choral laments used by the bands.

We are bereft of a leader.
 Death has left us without a leader.
 Grandsire Gyamfi Amoyaw of Wonoo,
 He hails from Wonoo, Grandsire Gyamfi Amoyaw,
 He has died and left us without a leader.
 Alas, mother! Alas, father!
 Alas, mother! Alas, father!

We are being carried away,
 Death is carrying all away.
 Grandsire Gyamfi Amoyaw of Wonoo,
 He hails from Wonoo, Grandsire Gyamfi Amoyaw,
 Death is carrying us all away.
 Alas mother! Alas, father!
 Alas, mother! Alas, father!²⁰

The use of the above lament would have been restricted to a particular band because:

Particular laments are known to bands that sing them. Dirges, however, are not confined to bands. They are known in varying degrees to many women. Details of names and attributes may be restricted to lineages, but the general patterns are common to all.²¹

²⁰ Ibid., p. 122.

²¹ Ibid., p. 129.

SETTING

Funerals were considered important social occasions in Africa. Kofi Asare Opoku describes them in these terms:

Funerals are great social occasion in West Africa. They generally involve whole communities who gather together at these events to perform appropriate rites which help to strengthen the bond between the living and the dead.²²

Nketia adds: "the event carries with it certain expectations of individuals."²³ As further indication of the festive (?) occasion Nketia continues:

A good deal of social intercourse goes on while the funeral lasts: customary greetings and return of greetings, expression of sympathy by word of mouth and a handshake, the serving of drinks to visitors, the narration of the circumstances of death and later events to visitors, conversation among visitors, music and dancing with accompanying comments, congratulations or even jokes and laughter among sections of the visitors, arguments or quarrels here or there, the pouring of libation at appropriate moments, the giving of presents of pieces of cloth for wrapping²⁴ the corpse, and of presents of money to the bereaved.

With the exception of the giving of the cloth the above description could very well fit a black funeral.

Though the deceased was no longer a member of the living community the dirges attempted to express the point that there was no dichotomy between the living and the deceased. It was just a wish for continued relationships:

²²Kafia A. Opoku, West African Traditional Religion FEP International, 1978], p. 135.

²³Nketia, p. 1.

²⁴Ibid., pp. 13-4.

In the old Akan society... the commonest way by which someone living away from his friends and kinsman could keep in touch with them was through mutual exchange of greetings and gifts which were sent through a messenger. The expression "Send me a message" or "Send me something" was, and has come to mean, a desire for fellowship.²⁵

In this light, Nketia continues:

The desire for continued fellowship and love of a deceased is something expressed in the same terms.

Send me something when someone is coming.

Send me something for you and I exchange gifts.

When you send me something I would like a big pot that receives strangers.²⁶

As we consider the setting we repeat Koch's basic questions of who is speaking? who is listening? what is the prevailing mood? and what effect is sought?²⁷

In this African context the responses would be as follows: [1] the family and friends of the deceased are speaking in dirges through the mourners to express their loss. [2] The whole community is listening to see that the traditions of the community are upheld by the proper expressions. [3] The prevailing mood would be a dual one; sorrow within the community over the loss, coupled with the hope that the deceased has returned to his ancestors and abode. [4] That it be realized as a "good funeral" and that it be well attended.

²⁵Ibid., p. 48.

²⁶Ibid., p. 49.

²⁷Koch, p. 33.

That the activities were celebrated both as family and community activities can be witnessed through the individual dirges and the choral laments. Nketia indicates the use of the bands "in its traditional form played only at funerals."²⁸ In the Old Testament we noted that the dirge and lament were virtually co-terminous. Nketia, on the other hand, says in African use there is a difference between dirge and lament:

In dirges, usually the focus is on the present funeral, the present occasion of mourning. A deceased person is called to or addressed at the moment of singing as if he was present, even though he may have died long ago. The past is recalled in the theme of the Ancestor and place of domicile, but²⁹ only for the purpose of linking it up with the present.

In contrast, Nketia continues:

In the lament ... a wider time perspective may be used; a greater play of imagination may be shown. A lament may express grief for a person being mourned in the present, or it may express grief retroactively, or it may express grief for the future. [I shall die; No one should mourn for me when I die,³⁰ What is my day of death like, the drummer's child?]

As we recall the practice noted in the Old Testament as stated by Jeremiah and Amos to "call for the mourning women: and to "teach your daughters a lament," it is interesting to note that the Oriental practice of using women to perform the dirges is also carried out in African tribes.

²⁸Nketia, p. 119.

²⁹Ibid., p. 128.

³⁰Ibid.

Nketia informs us particularly of the Akan tribe:

In the past the Akan woman was trained to sing the dirge while a girl. Frequent visits to funerals, the teaching of the poetry of the dirge by her mother or grandmother, ...her own frequent practice in making up verses while singing with her friends gave her the knowledge, skill and musicianship required in the performance.³¹

Thus we see the transmittal of such was rooted in a collective past. That these conformed to a continuity of tradition is attested to by Nketia's observation that:

All of his informants were old or middle aged women. Most of these were regarded by the communities³² in which they lived as a people who had the knowledge.

Though the men did not perform the dirges, it is interesting to note Nketia's observation that the women who served as his instructors in the text did so in the presence of the chief and the clan leaders "who insisted on being present to insure that the women told the correct thing." Thus, we are made aware of their concerns to remain faithful to the concepts of oral tradition in the performance of the dirge.

³¹ Ibid., p. 117.

³² Ibid., p. 2.

³³ Ibid., p. 3.

INTENTION

The funeral dirges used by the Akan people is congruent with their philosophy of death. Opoku informs us:

... in general West Africans regard death not as the end of life but as a transition from this present earthly life to another life of the Spirits.³⁴

The importance of the role of the Ancestor, as evidenced in the Old Testament and Near Eastern literature, is also emphasized in African culture. They consider it as "a journey which man must make in order to reach the life beyond and continue to live as an Ancestor."³⁵

We feel we have given supportive evidence that the intent of the mourners has been to aid and abet the deceased through praise and identification of their best attributes to speed them on their journey as they return to their domicile. Their dirges are in the spirit of praise rather than vindictiveness. For in contrast to the mashal or taunt prevalent in prophetic dirges of the Old Testament, one does not find these factors in the Akan dirges. On the other hand, one notes an almost overwhelming use of "good" metaphors in their dirges.

We are informed the term Gye-me-di means "believe me." Here it is used as a strong name for a person to be believed who never misses the mark, and consequently is a ter-

³⁴Opoku, p. 133.

³⁵Ibid.

ror.³⁶ The praise appellation, the day-name and the dirge name are indicative of the intent through metaphorical language to exemplify the deceased. As Nketia informs us:

For mourners ... they are means of indicating their relationship or attitude to the deceased, and of giving added intensity to their dirges.³⁷

A further sampling of the dirges reveals some of the following creative or "stock" expressions:

The slender arm of benevolence.

My friend on whom I depend.

Father ... whose hand is always tempting him to give.

Grandmother, the big cooking pot that entertains strangers.

You are a mighty tree laden with big branches laden with fruit. When children come to you they find something to eat.

Although a man, he was a mother to children.

He was like the tree of the plantain³⁸ planted behind the house that gave shade and coolness.

Thus we see, through the above examples, one element of the intent of the dirge was "... to praise the deceased, to elevate him by indicating that he was not without some good point even if he was not outstanding in the community."³⁹

The dirge and the lament merged in the sense of past, present, and future because it was the mourner's intent to identify with the clan or Ntor, with the domicile of the

³⁶ Nketia, p. 141.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 35-6.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 34.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 37.

deceased on the basis of all the traditions of the group.

Nketia expresses it in this manner;

In dealing with the dirge...we are dealing in the main with traditional expressions stored up in the minds of individuals and re-created by them in appropriate contexts, traditional expressions cast in forms which individuals learn to handle them because society expects them to use them in the situation of the funeral.⁴⁰

The dirge is sung in honor of the deceased person to mourn him, to elevate him, to cherish his name everlastingly.

In doing this, the links between the present and the past, the⁴¹ links between the living and the dead are expressed.

The celebration of death becomes a real celebration because:

Grief and sorrow may well be personal and private, nevertheless. Akan society expects that on the occasion of a funeral they would be⁴² expressed publicly through the singing of the dirge.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 3

⁴¹Ibid., p. 18

⁴²Ibid., p. 8

Chapter IV

A DIRGE FROM THE BLACK PERSPECTIVE

Literary forms of the Black church or the Black community do not present us with specific dirges as found in the Old Testament or African cultures. As we recall the dirges of the previous chapters we will remember they could be recognized by form and style. These would have included the various typology of the African dirges utilizing stated funereal form, the meter of the qinah, the wailing of the dirges by the women mourners, and the specific terminology found in both cultures including the term "alas."

Since our thesis stipulated that the form critical approach can be postulated toward an inquiry of Black tradition we shall need to examine various genres to determine which would be most useful to conduct such an inquiry. In this regard we can turn to both streams of input arising out of the Old Testament and African cultures to determine our working model for the Black tradition. These would include the element of preaching which has its roots in the Old and New Testaments, and the element of music arising out of the African culture.

In addition to these factors must be added other facets of tradition such as folk-tales, prayers and proverbs. These and other resources constitute practices re-

lated to the oral tradition of the Black church and community. Since we cannot find dirges in any of these factors we must focus our attention upon those particular elements which speak to the celebration of death in the Black community. We feel that we find these in the elements of sermons and music in the Black church.

Nketia's words which closed the previous chapter¹ regarding society's expectations of behavior at the occasion of a funeral serve to sharpen our feelings of expectations which can be related to other contexts. For example, in terms of preaching the Black church wants to know "Can the Reverend Tell the Story?" Not only is it important "what" he says to tell the story, but of equal weight is "how" he tells the story. The form used by the Black preacher is of great importance as it relates to the expectations within the Black church.

James Weldon Johnson dramatizes this point in the preface of his book on sermons in verse.² He tells of the occasion when he arrived at a very late hour for a church service. It was still much later when the principal speaker began his sermon. The minister seemed awed by Johnson's presence. This seemed to have affected his style of preach-

¹ J.H. Nketia, Funeral Dirges of the Akan People [Achimota: Townsend, 1955], p. 8.

² James Weldon Johnson, God's Trombones, [New York: Viking Press, 1927].

ing. Realizing that he was not holding his audience he changed to "story" style and captivated his audience. Johnson indicates that sermon became the model for his famous poem on "Creation," and undoubtedly had similar influence on "Go Down Death." We have chosen the latter sermon as our dirge paradigm, because it effectively tells our dirge "story."

We are using it because it is expressed in poetic form, similar poetic forms of the qinah and African dirges. Further, we feel its adaptability to a form critical inquiry relating to structure, genre, setting, and intention. We shall not limit the inquiry to this "dirge alone, but shall use other categories which speak to the traditions of Blacks as they relate to the celebration of death.

³Ibid., pp. 17-20; 27-30.

POEM-DIRGE

Weep not, weep not,
She is not dead:
She's resting in the bosom of Jesus.
Heart-broken husband -- weep no more;
Grief-stricken son -- weep no more.

Day before yesterday morning,
God was looking down from his great, high heaven,
Looking down on all his children,
And his eye fell on Sister Caroline,
Tossing on her bed of pain.
And God's big heart was touched with pity,
With the everlasting pity.

And God sat back on his throne,
And he commanded that tall, bright angel standing at his
right hand:
Call me Death!
And that tall, bright angel cried in a voice
That broke like a clap of thunder:
Call Death! -- Call Death!
And the echo sounded down the streets of heaven
Till it reached back to that shadowy place,
Where Death waits with his pale, white horses.

And death heard the summons,
And he leaped on his fastest horse,
Pale as a sheet in the moonlight.
Up the golden street Death galloped,
And the hoofs of his horse struck fire from the gold,
But they didn't make no sound.
Up Death rode to the Great White Throne,
And waited for God's command.

And God said: Go down, Death, go down,
Go down to Savannah, Georgia,
Down in Yamacraw,
And find Sister Caroline.
She's borne the burden and heat of the day,
And she's tired --
She's weary --
Go down, Death, and bring her to me.

And Death didn't say a word,
 But he loosed the reins on his pale white horse,
 And he clamped the spurs to his bloodless sides,
 And out and down he rode,
 Through heaven's pearly gates,
 Past suns and moon and stars;
 On death rode,
 And the foam from his horse was like a comet in the sky;
 On death rode,
 Leaving the lightning's flashes behind;
 Straight on down he came.

While we were watching round her bed,
 She turned her eyes and looked away,
 She saw what we couldn't see;
 She saw Old Death. She saw Old Death
 Coming like a fallen star.
 But death didn't frighten Sister Caroline;
 He looked to her like a welcome friend.
 And she whispered to us: I'm going home,
 And she smiled and closed her eyes.

And Death took her up like a baby,
 And she lay in his icy arms,
 But she didn't feel no chill.
 And Death began to ride again --
 Up beyond the evening star,
 Out beyond the morning star,
 Into the glittering light of glory,
 On to the Great White Throne.
 And there he laid Sister Caroline
 On the loving breast of Jesus.

And Jesus took his own hand and wiped away her tears,
 And he smoothed the furrows from her face,
 And the angels sang a little song,
 And Jesus rocked her in his arms,
 And kept a-saying: Take your rest,
 Take your rest.

Weep not -- weep not,
 She is not dead;
 She's resting in the bosom of Jesus.⁴

⁴Ibid., pp. 27-30.

STRUCTURE

The structure may be outlined as follows:

- I. The prologue.
 - A. Consolation. [Stanzas 1-2]
- II. God's view of the deceased.
 - A. God's summons of death.
 - B. Hush, Somebody's Calling my Name. [Stanza 3]
- III. The Heavenly Council.
 - A. God's charge to Death.
 - B. She's Borne the Burden and Heat of the Day.
 - C. Swing Low Sweet Chariot. [Stanzas 5-6]
- V. The End of the Journey.
 - A. Soon One Morning Death Comes Creepin' in the Room. [Stanza 7]
- VI. The Celestial Glory.
 - A. Take my Hand Precious Lord, Lead Me On. Stanza 8]
- VII. The House Not Made With Hands.
 - A. And I tell You They're Shouting in Heaven. [Stanza 9]
- VIII. The Benediction.
 - A. She's in God's Hands Now. [Stanza 10]

In a scene reminiscent of the "Heavenly Council" as conceptualized by Old Testament Scholars⁵ Johnson portrays a picture in stanzas 1-6 that is very popular in the Black church, i.e., God in his heavenly home talking with his angels. However this concept is not to be compared with the caricature portrayal of De Lawd in Green Pastures.⁶ We can recognize many allusions used in sermons, music, and prayers of the Black church in these stanzas of our Dirge. Many of these have become stock expressions in sermons and prayers.

The first and second stanzas can be described as a prologue introducing the scene of the Heavenly Council in which we hear the Black preacher say in non-funeral as well as funereal occasions "God will wipe away all tears and all your sorrows." The second stanza portrays an omniscient God who personally identifies with the suffering of one of his children.

The third stanza begins the activity of the Heavenly Council as God sets in motion the plan to alleviate the suffering of Sister Caroline. It is said that Black sermons must be heard rather than read to catch the effect of Black

⁵ H. Wheeler Robinson, "The Council of Yahweh," Journal of Theological Studies, XLV, [1944], 151-7.

⁶ Marc Connally, The Green Pastures; a fable suggested by sketches in Roark Bradford Ol Man Adam and his Children [New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1929].

preaching. Here, however, the reader can actually visualize the preacher taking the role of God to say "Call Death! Call Death!" One can, also, catch the telling effect of the Black community as it sings on a personal basis "Hush, Somebody's Calling My Name."

In the fourth stanza we see Death respond to the summons of the Heavenly Council and reports to God. In his role as spokesman for God we again visualize the effect the Black preacher would have on the mourners as he reports this scene. In the fifth stanza we are given the message of God's charge to Death. Here the preacher places emphasis upon an expression that characterizes the feelings of the community about those it regards as its saints -- "She's borne the burden and heat of the day."

The sixth stanza marks the close of the opening portion of the scene of the Heavenly Council. Death now goes forth to carry out God's request. Here the Old Testament influence upon the Black church and community becomes "story" as it sings "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." Hear the Black preacher proclaim "Through Heaven's pearly gates, past suns, moons, and stars" God is sending the Death angel "to carry them home."

On the one hand, the prayer tradition of the Black church says "I thank you that last night's sleeping couch was not my cooling board and my cover was not my winding

sheet."⁷ On the other hand, there is the trusting response which says, "And when I've reached the end of my journey, and when life's toils are ended, take me to thy kingdom's shore." Thus in the seventh stanza Sister Caroline could say "I'm going home."

Now Death has carried out its mission and begun the return journey back to that celestial glory. God has lifted her burden and eased her anguish in the eighth stanza. In spite of our grief and sorrow we rejoice and we want to feel that same sense of closeness and so we sing "Take My Hand Precious Lord, Lead Me On." We want to say "Send me something."

The request of God in Council has been carried out. Death has fulfilled its mission. So stanzas nine and ten tell us "There's no more sorrow, no more tears. She's resting in the arms of Jesus." Thus, we as mourners and the Black church can celebrate and "I tell you they're shouting in Heaven" would be the preacher's benediction in the closing stanza.

⁷James H. Cone, God of the Oppressed (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), p. 4.

GENRE

As we indicated in the introductory remarks for this chapter, Black oral tradition is rooted in its folk tales, folk sermons, music and proverbs. In essence these are basic components for all cultures. Nevertheless, each culture has its own identity. Thus we came to know the prophetic dirge for the Old Testament, and the distinctive TYPES for the Akan culture.

Now, we identify Black folk tales, Black folk sermons, Black preaching, Black spirituals, Black gospel music, Black riddles, and Black wisdom. A mood cannot be defined as a genre, but the Black mood takes on a life of its own, thereby generating a typology and identity of its own.

The Black folk sermon, as evidenced in our "dirge" reflects the attitudes of a particular people. The spirituals and gospel music developed into a typology serving particular needs. We recall that some spirituals served as message units to divert the attention of masters and overseers. So they sang "There's a meeting here tonight," and "Steal Away." Miles Mark Fisher characterizes some spirituals as Deep River songs to denote the old home over there as well as up there.⁸ Wyatt T. Walker's table of contents

⁸ Miles Mark Fisher, Negro Slave Songs in the United States [New York: Citadel Press, 1978], pp. 41-87.

is sub-titles "The Afro-American Spiritual, Black Meter Music, Hymns of Improvisation, and Gospel: Historic and Modern."⁹ Included in all of the categories would be the music which speaks to the situation of Death.

It is interesting to note that the activities of the "mourning women" were rooted in the oral traditions of both the Old Testament and African cultures. In other words, the conditions contributed to the genre of the dirge. Thus, we recognize the fact that a "form" was developed to indicate mourning.

Black culture does have the counterpart of the "mourning women." This phase of African culture was not handed down as a part of the oral tradition. What the women did was handed down. How the prophets spoke was handed down. Thus the genre of music and sermons have, themselves, been established in traditional form and can be recognized as "Black church tradition."

⁹Wyatt T. Walker, Somebody's Calling My Name [Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1979], p. 14.

SETTING

Who is speaking?
Who is listening?
What is the prevailing mood?
What effect is sought?

The questions which were asked of the prophetic dirge and the Akan dirge must now be asked of the Black dirge. Our answers are as follows:

[1] The preacher is speaking and describing God's concern for the anguish and suffering of his people.

[2] The family and community who compose the congregation of mourners are the listeners.

[3] It is a mood of grief and loss, but, also, of hopeful expectation that God would wipe away her tears as well as theirs.

[4] To alleviate the pain and translate its energy into joy, it was a moment of rejoicing that one of the faithful had gone home and, therefore, it was a moment of celebration.

The Sitz im Leben for the Black church is the social setting of the Black experience which speaks to the past, the present, and the future. This project has not concerned itself, thus far, with the abject feeling of degradation experienced by the slave, nor with the era of rejection

¹⁰Klaus Koch, The Growth of Biblical Tradition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), p. 33.

suffered in the era of Reconstruction, nor the atmosphere of alienation which prevails for contemporary society. Yet through it all have been those agencies which became institutionalized to serve as a "shelter in the time of storm."

Bishop Joseph Johnson Jr. describes the role of the Black preacher with these words:

He was a part of the travail of his people, for whatever happened to them, happened to him also. Wherever they were, he was there...kneeling on the cold dirt floor of a slave cabin, working in the hot dusty fields, walking the lonely wilderness trails to get to his church and his people.

Man of God by calling -- but often teacher, healer, carpenter and undertaker by necessity. It was he who took down the mutilated bodies of Black men after the mobs had done their worst...When a child was born he was there to bless and cheer, when death came close he was there to guide and comfort.¹¹

In a broader sense the Black preacher was but a reflection of the Black church which he served. They were forbidden to preach, yet they preached. They were discouraged from conducting religious services, yet they held church. They were restricted from burying their dead, yet they mourned and buried their dead. Eugene Genovese reports:

The majority of ex-slaves whose testimony we have did recall that masters permitted their slaves to have fune-

¹¹ Joseph A. Johnson Jr., The Soul of the Black Preacher (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1971), p. 11.

ral ceremonies. 'When a slave die he was just another dead nigger. Massa he builded a wooden box and put the nigger in and carry him to the hole in the ground, Us march around the grave three times and that all.'¹²

We learned that the slaves learned to circumvent the restriction that a white preacher had to be present at a Black funeral by holding their funerals at night. Yet they became large events. Genovese informs us:

A slave funeral became a pagaent, a major event, a community effort...Funerals required considerable expenditure for feeding and quartering; and the occasion, no matter how grim, brought together friends and relatives who normally did not see each other.¹³

It should be noted that for our day, family reunions are occurring with greater frequency because members of the family state they want to see family members other than at a funeral.

It has only been within recent years that Black culture has tried to match the grandeur and expenses attached to lavish weddings. The Black community does not have a comparable event to the Bar Mitzvah. Nor could they belong to the private country clubs. But they could and did have expensive funerals. We have to put our loved ones away in style. Like their Akan counterparts the Black community wants to know "was it a good service? Was it well attended?"

¹²Eugene D. Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 195.

¹³Ibid., p. 197.

The extravagance attached to funeral expenses is not a recent phenomenon. Genovese first quotes a source and then adds his own comment with these words:

'No Negro in Cottonville,' wrote Hortense Powdermaker of the Yazoo Delta in the 1930's, 'can live unless he is assured of a fine funeral when he dies.' The funeral has figured prominently as a social event, and an expression of community. They care passionately about their funeral and demand that they be elaborate.¹⁴

We cannot overlook the element of personal service rendered by the Black church for its constituency as activities of celebration which are related to the setting of the Black community. Mitchell places it on an existential plane:

Existence has never been for [Black people] overwhelmingly negative. So Black folk tradition acts out its deepest grief at the funeral and then goes to the feast.¹⁵

Black churches do not depend upon paid professional musicians to perform the music at funerals. This is a part of the activities of the regular choirs even to the extent of having "grieving choirs." Charles Boddie tells us:

The reason Shiloh acquired a 'grieving' choir for funerals only after the Second Baptist Church in Los Angeles, already had one was that Shiloh did not think of it first.¹⁶

¹⁴Ibid., p. 201.

¹⁵Henry H. Mitchell, Black Belief [New York: Harper and Row, 1975], p. 121.

¹⁶Charles E. Boddie, God's Bad Boys Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1972], pp. 37-8.

We cannot overlook one of the basic service groups of the Black church, namely, the usher boards. Both Boddie who refers to them as the "glory department,"¹⁷ and Kenneth Henry who speaks of "the need for a study of the psychology of ushering,"¹⁸ indicate the tremendous value of usher boards in the Black church.

One has to witness this from the Black perspective to appreciate the contribution made by ushers. Many Black churches have a very high degree of celebrative activity. It is usually the ushers who know how to control this enthusiasm and at the same time allow the celebrater the freedom of the activity of "rejoicing." It is, also, the ushers who have the ability to assuage the grief of the bereaved and mourners, and are most supportive in their assistance. Indeed, a Black funeral becomes an act of celebration because of their participation.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁸Kenneth E. Henry, "Persons, Perspectives and Powers," Impact No. 2, [1979] 25.

INTENTION

We are able to discern a dual attitude on the part of the Black community toward death. The first evolves out of the traditions rooted in historical activity. The second relates to the existential situation of Black people. In the Black church both attitudes strongly influence the meaning of death.

As we endeavor to determine the historical tradition we would be mindful of the African concept of death which views death as a journey and the hope at the end of the journey for the deceased's safe arrival at his point of origin. This strongly influenced the music of the Black community. John Lovell reminds us:

In the dozens of songs which speak of reunion with mother, fathers, sisters, brothers, and other beloved dead, their African beliefs are assuredly being perpetuated.¹⁹

Thus, one can read a double meaning in Sister Caroline's words. "I'm going home."²⁰

The Black person has truly known death from the perspective of oppression. As Howard Thurman expresses it:

Death was a fact, inescapable, persistent for the slave. It was extremely compelling because of the cheapness which his life was regarded. He was constantly faced

¹⁹ John Lovell Jr., Black Song: The Flame and the Forge (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 307.

²⁰ James Weldon Johnson, God's Trombones, (New York: Viking Press, 1927), p. 29.

with the threat of death.²¹

The community's contact with the dead was immediate and inescapable. Celebration became a very personal thing because:

The family or friends washed the body of the dead. The grave clothes were personally selected or especially²² made. The coffin itself was made by a familiar hand.

Such treatment from their oppressors resulted in a remarkable counter productivity. It is interesting to note that where we were not able to detect the mashal theme of the Old Testament in the African dirge, we are able to discover it repeatedly in the literature of the Black church and community. The life of the slave and the contemporary Black seem as one in terms of the oppression each has faced. A means of retaliation came into being which allowed them a sense of self-esteem within their own community. They learned to talk back through their preaching, music, and drama.

First, they came to realize that death, in essence, became a release from that oppression, and through death would come a sense of victory and so came the taunt:

And before I'll be a slave
I'll be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord and be free.

This applied, also, to the river of death "so chilly so cold"

²¹ Howard Thurman, Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Seath [Richmond: Friends United Press, 1975], p. 115.

²² Ibid.

I know that water is chilly and cold,
 Hallelujah to that lamb,
 But I have Jesus in my soul,
 Satan's just like a snake in the grass
 He's waiting for to bite you as pass,
 Hallelujah to that lamb.

If one were to take an educated guess it would not be difficult to determine who Satan was. Likewise, it must have been with satiric mirth that they sang:

Everybody talkin' 'bout heaven
 aint going there.

In like manner if one can perceive the depths of Black "signification," then you cannot help but recognize the taunt so vividly portrayed in the drama written by Ossie Davis.²³ The funeral scene is sheer irony. For it is not the funeral of a Black man, but the funeral of a white man at a Black church who died "standing up."

PURLIE: Take up his bones, for he who was my skin's enemy was brave enough to die standing up for what he believed...and is the wish of his family--and his friends that he be buried likewise.

[the PALLBEARER's enter carrying OL' CAPN'S ornate coffin just as he would have wished; standing up.²⁴
 How many Blacks have died "standing up," and not given the decency of a funeral? No. his African forbears may not have used the taunt as a part of the dirge, but his descendants did -- with ironic intent.

²³Ossie Davis, "Purlie Victorious," in Clinton Oliver and Stephanie Sills (eds), Contemporary Black Drama (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971).

²⁴Ibid., p. 185.

Chapter V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

It was our thesis that the form critical method could be applied to the oral traditions of the Black church as they related to the celebration of death. We narrowed our scope to a discussion of the dirges uttered at the time of death. Our discussion for the Old Testament centered upon the prophetic dirge; the Akan example upon a selected TYPE "A" delineated by Nketia out of the oral tradition of the West African clan; and in the Black culture we attempted to demonstrate the Johnson's poem is subject to a form critical inquiry in like manner.

It has been our purpose, also, to demonstrate a methodology which "came to terms with the specifically religious element in the religion of Black Americans."¹ We are reminded that the form critical method grew out of the needs of Old Testament scholarship to go behind the literary forms to discover the basic material out of which the literary derived. We believe that it would be correct to say that Nketia was not aware that he was applying a form critical inquiry in his study of the Akan dirge. Yet he has applied the same tools that outstanding Old Testament scho-

¹Charles H. Long, "Perspectives for a Study of Afro-American Religion in the United States," History of Religions, XI [August 1971], 54.

lars used. Gunkel,² von Rad,³ Koch,⁴ and Tucker⁵ are considered authorities in this field.

It follows, then, that Black historians and theologians could find the form critical method a useful tool to move behind Black literary material to reveal the oral tradition of the Black church and community. Previous writers have expressed such a need in other ways. Mitchell states "there is far more of this body of Black belief that I have not touched."⁶ In this regard Lovell adds:

We will also have the measurements for determining whether and to what extent a given song [or song tradition] or imitative; on the surface, or deeply religious, a congregational chant; a wild individual cry, or a critique of society.

Walker speaks of the need for further inquiry:

There is no way, generally or specifically, that the Black church can function in the real world without the instruments of the struggle: a theology grounded in liberation, a contemporary sense of historical context, a

² Herman Gunkel, The Legends of Genesis (New York: Schocken Books, 1964).

³ Gerhard von Rad, "The Form Critical Problem of the Hexateuch," in The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays (New York: McGraw Hill, 1966).

⁴ Klaus Koch, The Growth of Biblical Tradition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964).

⁵ Gene M. Tucker, Form Criticism of the Old Testament (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

⁶ Henry H. Mitchell, Black Belief (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 153.

⁷ John Lovell Jr., Black Song (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 4.

God-ordained sense of destiny in this land, and the determination to endure. Each of the above could require an inquiry in the context of the Black experience in America.

Other writers will need to use the tools of form criticism to investigate the oral tradition of Black culture by way of structure, genre, setting, and intention.

Even for the celebration of death such an inquiry could be based on the famous funeral march of New Orleans. Brief mention of this activity is made in works by LeRoi Jones,⁹ Eileen Southern,¹⁰ and Frederic Ramsey.¹¹ To try to get more information on this subject, a personal conversation was held with Dr. Elliot J. Mason Sr. Dr. Mason, a native of New Orleans, told of participating in these marches in his youth in the early 1930's as a member of the "second line."¹²

The mood was very somber and dirge-like as the bands

⁸Wyatt T. Walker, Somebody's Calling My Name (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1979), p. 106.

⁹LeRoi Jones, Blues People (New York: Morrow, 1963, pp. 74-5.

¹⁰Eileen Southern, The Music of Black Americans (New York: Norton, 1971), pp. 342-3.

¹¹Frederic Ramsey Jr., Been Here and Gone (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1960), pp. 133-163.

¹²An interview conducted with Dr. Elliot J. Mason Sr. pastor, Trinity Baptist Church, Los Angeles, CA on March 20, 1980. The "second line" mentioned by Dr. Mason consisted of non-band members who beat a pair of sticks together in rhythm with the drums.

marched slowly to the cemetery playing "Nearer My God To Thee." The mood became very celebrative on the return from the cemetery when the band played "Didn't He Ramble." Two interesting observations were made. First, to his recollection, the bands were used more by fraternal organizations and members of Catholic churches than by Protestants. An interesting conclusion can be made from the second observation, that you entered the cemetery by one gate and departed by another one. Thus, one gate was for sorrow, the other one for joy.

A form critical inquiry stressing setting and intent could be made for the above aspect of celebration. Mitchell, Lovell, and Walker indicated other genre which lend themselves to form critical inquiry in terms of oral tradition.

As we express our conclusions we are aware of the atmosphere of loss and grief at the time of death. Thus, the question must be asked, is it an incongruency to speak of death as a moment of celebration? We feel that our selected paradigms demonstrate the point that it is, indeed, a Celebration. Even at the time of the prophets the nation lamented the loss of its loved ones. However, the prophets were trying to tell the nation that it had forgotten its covenantal relationship, thus the mourning women had to be called. Its acceptance as a mood in the Akan society can be seen in the fact that Nketia gives as the title of one

chapters of his study "The Place of the Dirge in the Funeral Celebration."¹³

The acceptance of the terminology of celebration in the Black church can be illustrated in the use of the term by a student of the Ecumenical Center for Black Church Studies in Los Angeles. Having been unable to attend the class in a previous week the student came to the instructor to explain his absence. The student stated he had to attend a funeral which, in his judgment, was truly a celebration. He had attended a funeral at a Pentecostal church which had lasted over four hours, and the testimony regarding the deceased was of such an exemplary nature that he only observed one person to shed tears.

The feeling of celebration can also be experienced in passages of a funeral sermon given by John Jasper at the funerals of William Ellyson and Mary Barnes:

Lemme say a word about this William Ellyson was a no good man - he didn' say he was; he didn' try to be good, and they tell me he die as he live, out of God and 'out hope in the world. It is a bad tale to tell on him, but he fix the story himself. As the tree falls there must it lay. If you wants folk who live wrong to be preached and sung to glory, dont bring 'em to Jasper. God comfort the mornur and warn the unruly. But my brethren Mary Barnes was different. She were washed in the blood of the lamb and walked in white. Her religion were of God...Our sister Mary, good bye. Your race is won but your crown is sure.

¹³ J.H. Nketia, Funeral Dirges of the Akan People (Achimota, Townsend, 1955), p.v.

My Master Jesus done jerked the sting of death, done broke with the scepter of the king of terrors, and he done gone into the grave and rob it of its victorious banners, and fixed nice and smooth for his people to pas through. More en that, he has writ a song, a shoutin anthem for us to sing when we go thrrough passin suns and stars, and singing that song, "Thanks be to God,¹⁴ who gives us the victory through the Lord Jesus Christ.

In Jubilee, Margaret Walker vividly dramatizes that feeling of Celebration in Brother Zeke's prayer for Sister Hetta. This prayer is very reminiscent of our poem-dirge

Lord, God-Amighty, you done told us in your Word to seek and you shall find; knock and the door be open; ask and it shall be given when your love come twinklin'down. And Lord, Lord, tonight we is a seekin' way down here in dis here rain-washed world, kneelin' here by this bed of afflicting pain, your humble servant is a knockin' and askin' for your lovin' mercy, and your tender love.

This here sister is tired a-sufferin'; Lord, and she wants to come on home. We ask you to roll down that sweet chariot right here by her bed, just you did for Lishy, so she can step in kinda easy like and ride on home to Glory. Gather her in your bosom like you done Father Abraham and give her rest. She weak, Lord, and she weary, but her eyes is a fixin for to light on dem golden streets of glory and dem pearly gates of God. She beggin for to set at your welcome table and feast on milk and honey. She wants to put on them angel wings and wear dat crown and dem pretty little golden slippers. She done been broke like a straw in the wind and she ain't got no strength, but she got the faith, Lord, and she got the promise of your almighty Word. Lead her through this wilderness of sin and tribulation. Give her grace to stand by the river of¹⁵ Jordan and cross her over to hear Gabe blow that horn.

¹⁴ John Jasper, "A Picture of Heaven," in Clyde E. Fant [ed.] 20 Centuries of Great Preaching [Waco: Word Books, 1971], pp. 237-239.

¹⁵ Margaret A. Walker, Jubilee, [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966], p.10.

In conclusion, the writer can testify to the moment of Celebration in the sermons of his father who would exclaim, "Beyond this veil of tears we have a home not made with hands," and hear his mother respond "Yes, Lord!"

HALLELUJAH

AMEN

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